

State leaders now step closer to Delta solution

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Water interests find there's lots to like on list

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LOS ANGELES — Despite differences over a Peripheral Canal, state water leaders said a new list of 20 options for fixing the Delta environment brings them closer to solving the state's water problems.

There was something for everyone to like and dislike — from canals and reservoirs to an option to buy out and close 800,000 acres of farms to save water.

Urban, farm and environmental leaders on an advisory panel, however, agreed Thursday that planners came up with a thorough list of options to whittle down into a solution for the Delta's battered fisheries and the state's water shortages.

Several Bay Area members of the Bay-Delta Advisory Council said they were pleased that all the alternatives included measures to protect Delta fish, drinking water and levees and to promote water conservation.

"Contra Costa leaders can feel satisfied that what they've been trying to accomplish for 20 years in water policy is now gospel," said Sunne McPeak, a former Contra Costa County supervisor who is vice chairwoman of the Delta council.

The council advises planners in the state-federal CALFED Bay-Delta program, whose mission is to fix Delta water and environmental problems.

Such a consensus over conservation and Delta protections would have been unthinkable 14 years ago, water management leaders said. That is when voters shot down a plan for a water shipment channel around the Delta — the Peripheral Canal — that lacked protections for the Delta environment or levees.

Maintaining agreement among council members may become more difficult in the next three months as water planners whittle the 20 options down to a list of three to five alternatives.

A case in point: Six of the 20 options have some form of canal around the Delta to move water to farms and cities between Livermore and San Diego. Bay Area water leaders have fought such a canal because they believe it could be used to move too much water from the Delta at the expense of fish.

Bay Area environmentalists say it's important to evaluate such canal plans now to avoid criticism later that planners weren't thorough in looking at all options.

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hensive solution if we look at only a few things," said Gary Bobker of the Bay Institute, an environmental group monitoring CALFED. "If you limit the options, the ones left on the table may not be the ones you want."

Water suppliers and environmentalists say the current system for pumping water out of the Delta to 22 million Californians is a mess.

Too many fish are sucked into the pumps near Tracy, environmentalists say. And farmers and cities say the pumping restrictions to protect salmon and Delta smelt has made their supplies undependable.

CALFED planners say moving water around the Delta in a canal to export pumps would protect fish from getting sucked up.

But planners suggested other options to help fish. Californians could build reservoirs to store wet-year flows, to be released for fish and drinking water in dry years.

Planners also suggest converting several Delta islands into lakes that would store water for dry years.

Mary Selkirk, a Bay-Delta council member from Berkeley, said she is pleased all the 20 options call for water saving and efficient use.

"I think we're moving in the right direction," said Selkirk, also a member of the East Bay Municipal Utility District board. "The fact that conservation has been elevated to a core action is very important."

Tom Graff, an Environmental Defense Fund attorney on the Bay-Delta council, was more guarded.

"The 20 options are so extreme that they don't really give anyone a sense of where this group is going. They've covered all their bases without eliminating anything," Graff said.

Lester Snow, the CALFED program manager, said no plan to fix Delta water and environmental problems would succeed without broad support from leaders for farmers, cities and environmental groups.

CALFED plans to have a workshop on the 20 alternatives at 9 a.m. Feb. 26 at the Beverly Garland Hotel in Sacramento.